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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: REDS SPOIL TWO RALLIES, CANCEL ONE OF THEIR OWN

REF: A. Bangkok 495 (Thai Farmers: Trying to Stand Out)
 1B. Bangkok 486 (Thai Protest Update: Redshirts)
 1C. Chiang Mai 24 (By-Elections, Reds and Migrants)
 1D. Chiang Mai 18 (Tougher Times Ahead)

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) The last two weeks of February saw a flurry of activity by pro-Thaksin "redshirt" groups in two northern provinces. The leading Rak Chiang Mai 51 (RCM51) group disrupted the rallies of two apolitical groups (corn farmers and gay activists), and redshirts cancelled a rally due to infighting among various local pro-Thaksin groups. Meanwhile, redshirt threats to prevent newly appointed provincial and regional police officials from taking power did not materialize. With the new chiefs now in place, police contacts expect a less lenient attitude toward pro-Thaksin supporters, and more rigorous enforcement of the law against political groups in general.

2. (SBU) Comment: Disrupting demonstrations by corn farmers and gay pride groups that have nothing to do either with former PM Thaksin or the current Government indicates that redshirt groups up north are in search of a cause cihbre in an effort to maintain whatever momentum they still have. Absent the speedy achievement of key redshirt goals -- the resignation of either PM Abhisit Vechajiva, FM Kasit Piromya or both; reinstatement of the 1997 constitution; and House dissolution followed by elections -- the northern redshirts may weaken significantly as the current governing coalition consolidates its hold on power. We will continue to track the northern redshirts' next moves, paying particular attention to indications of the movement's strength. End Summary and Comment.

Splits Taking Their Toll

3. (SBU) As reported (Refs C and D), splits in pro-Thaksin forces in Chiang Mai are becoming more evident. On February 21, redshirt groups had to cancel a rally planned for Chiang Mai's main sports complex when the Bangkok-based United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) withdrew its financial support amidst squabbles between RCM51 and two break-away groups -- the "Love Thaksin People of Thailand," and "Redshirted New Blood". Police and other provincial contacts told us the redshirt groups were unable to pay the stadium rental fee of approximately \$8,350. They also told us that rally-goers, who used to be promised more than \$10 in return for their

participation, were promised about half that amount this time, and therefore decided not to participate. We also note press reports stating that on February 12, RCM51 members brandishing knives and batons twice clashed with supporters of the two break-away groups, resulting in minor injuries on both sides.

¶4. (SBU) According to different police contacts, another sign of the splits within the northern reds and potentially of weakness in the movement is the dwindling number of supporters from the north that the three pro-Thaksin groups have been able to mobilize to attend rallies in Bangkok. Ahead of the UDD's February 24-28 rally at Government House (Ref B), reportedly only a few van-loads of supporters traveled from Chiang Mai to Bangkok. On previous occasions, police told us the contingent tended to fill several large double-decker busses.

¶5. (SBU) Separately, we learned that the new Regional Police Commissioner and Chiang Mai Provincial Police Chief, both of whom are widely considered to be sympathetic to the pro-government Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), assumed their duties uneventfully on February 16 -- despite previous RCM51 threats to physically prevent them from taking office (Ref D). The new Region 5 Commissioner stated February 27 that preventing and controlling "conflict" of political ideas was one of his top four priorities. He also warned there would be no double standard regarding political groups that violate the rights of others or disturb the peace by excessively exercising their right to political protest. The police would be more vigilant with regard to political rallies, he added, and more accountable in following through on cases related to them. (Note: These comments are consistent with recent statements by Chiang Mai's Vice Governor, per Ref D).

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Reds Seek Non-Political Targets
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¶6. (U) Meanwhile, RCM51 was busy disrupting demonstrations by two other essentially apolitical groups -- corn farmers and gay rights activists. On February 19, RCM51 members asked corn farmers protesting the lack of government price supports in the wake of falling market prices to join their ranks and fight for former PM Thaksin. When the farmers refused, heated arguments broke out, according to police and press contacts, nearly resulting in a fist fight. Cooler heads eventually prevailed, and both groups dispersed. (Note: Protests by farmers at this time of year are not unusual; per Ref A.)

¶7. (U) On February 21, about 80 RCM51 supporters carrying banners stating "Gay Parade get out! Don't destroy our beautiful culture" confronted HIV/AIDS activists from Chiang Mai and other provinces at a gay pride parade near the Chiang Mai Governor's residence. According to press reports, the RCM51 members shouted anti-homosexual rhetoric and hurled plastic bags containing pig's blood at the 800-strong marchers. The sponsoring organization, the Gender Diversity Network, reluctantly cancelled the rally when the local police chief expressed concern that his 50-officer squad would not be able to handle the situation if the parade went ahead.

¶8. (U) On February 28 in Phitsanulok Province, local redshirt groups and RCM51 members clashed with locals at a concert organized by PAD supporters, but police prevented any violence.

¶9. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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